TESTIMONY OF
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BEFORE THE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON WATER RESOURCES & ENVIRONMENT
HOUSE TRANSPORTATION & INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE
UNITED STATE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATES

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Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee, I appreciate the opportunity to speak to you and the time and effort you are putting forth on this gigantic problem that we have in our country's backyard. My name is William Clifford Smith and I live in Houma, Louisiana. Houma is the economic center of Terrebonne Parish, located approximately 65 miles southwest of New Orleans, Louisiana, and 30 miles north of the Gulf of Mexico. Houma is 2" above the water -- and the water is rising. I live between the mouth of the Mississippi River and the Atchafalaya River, and unlike approximately one million in the New Orleans area who actually live below sea level, I live about 8' above sea level.

I am here today representing the Houma-Terrebonne Chamber of Commerce and its ±800 member business and ±22,000 employees. I have lived in the community of Houma for 69 years, all my life. I am a Civil Engineer and Land Surveyor and have owned and managed a consulting Civil Engineering and Land Surveying firm since 1958, when I received a Bachelor of Science degree in Civil Engineering from Louisiana State University. The firm was founded by my father, a Civil Engineering graduate of Tulane University in 1913. He, too, was a life-long resident of our community. The firm now has approximately 110 associates and is owned and managed by my children, one of whom is also a Civil Engineering graduate of Louisiana Tech University. I am also a Presidential Appointee to the Mississippi River Commission, which was established by Congress in 1879 to advise the Chief of Engineering of the U. S. Corps of Engineers on the development and improvements on the Mississippi River.

Over the years, our consulting engineering firm has provided professional services to major landowners; developers; local, state, and federal governmental agencies; oil and gas producing companies; and pipeline and electrical transmission companies. We provide assistance in wetlands permitting, feasibility studies, and cost estimates; perform field, property, and hydrologic surveys; and prepare plans, specifications, and supervise and administer construction contracts. We have literally lived on the land and waters of this area for over 90 years, three generations, and have made a living at it. Practically all of the wealth that we have accumulated over the years has been reinvested into our community.

Terrebonne Parish, literally the "good earth" in French, consists of approximately 1,300,000 acres of surface area. It is the second largest surface area parish in Louisiana.

We have approximately 1,000,000 acres that I consider to be wetlands, including: open water of the Gulf of Mexico, bays, lakes, saltwater marshes, fresh water marshes, and swamps. Unlike Orleans and Jefferson Parishes where approximately 1,000,000 people live below sea level, our citizens live on the other 300,000 acres of land that is generally above the 5 ft. contour on what we call ridges and highland. We have approximately 110,000 people living in Terrebonne Parish (about a 10% increase in the last 10 years). About 50,000 people live north of the Intracoastal Canal -- which generally runs east to west across our parish -- and 50,000 live south of the Canal. The urban area around Houma, the largest concentration of people, has an approximate population of 60,000. There are about 25,000 people who actually live south of Houma, closer to the Gulf of Mexico in Terrebonne Parish.

Economically, everything is very positive for our community and has been most of my life except in the 1980's and early 1990's. We have a 4% unemployment rate and a 4% average increase in sales tax collections per year. The only real negative is that we have lost over 400,000 acres of the land in our parish to coastal erosion in my lifetime. We are now losing approximately 10 sq. miles per year at an alarming rate. This land we have lost, primarily salt, brackish, and fresh water marshes and swampland, was our buffer and protection from the Gulf of Mexico and hurricanes. In the middle of Houma, which is about 30 miles from the Gulf of Mexico (or a little closer now), the Corps of Engineers has a recording gauge which has measured the elevation of the water in the Intracoastal Canal and Bayou Terrebonne 24 hours a day, 365 days of the year for the last 35 years. The average water elevation is about 18" to 24" higher than it was 35 years ago at this location. This is an area where most of our drainage systems are gravity, and we get an average of over 60" of rainfall a year. In the last 90 days alone, we have gotten over 30" of rainfall. This is where the statistics get down to the "real world". The loss of 400,000 acres in my lifetime and the loss of 10 sq. miles per year mean that the water table where we, the people South Louisiana, live is rising and causing many problems in our everyday lives.

My two grandfathers built houses in downtown Houma on the banks of Bayou Terrebonne circa 1900. The lots they acquired were approximately 11 ft. above sea level and boasted 200 year old live oak trees. One hundred year ago, they built their houses 6 ft. above the natural ground because their property would flood periodically from the bayou, a distributary of Bayou Lafourche -- which was a distributary of the Mississippi River. With the control and leveeing of the Mississippi and the closing of Bayou Lafourche from the Mississippi, we (the Corps of Engineers, the State of Louisiana, and the nation) solved that problem; however, we also allowed our area to become one of the worst deteriorating coastal areas in all the United States -- and the world. (SIDE NOTE—in 1903, local interests built a dam across the mouth of Bayou Lafourche to keep flood waters off their fields and it wasn't until 1935 that Congress authorized its permanent closure). Of course, the navigation canals, oil and gas access channels, pipelines, drainage canals, and the natural subsidence of the area have also contributed to this problem. Now I may live to see these houses flooded from the Gulf of Mexico.

At a previous Coastal Advisory Commission meeting in Louisiana, one observation was that 100 years ago we did not have a coastal erosion problem in Louisiana. This is probably correct. But, 100 years ago the Mississippi Valley from Minnesota to the Gulf of Mexico flooded every spring. There was no navigation down the Mississippi, Ohio, and Missouri Rivers. Our ancestors made the Mississippi Valley the "breadbasket" of America -- and the world. The Mississippi Valley has allowed our nation to be the richest, most powerful in the world. It also allowed our citizens to have the highest standard of living known to mankind; but in doing this, we created a coastal erosion problem in South Louisiana. We would not have the largest industrial complex in America on the river from Baton Rouge to New Orleans without the levees and control system along the Mississippi.

The last major flood of the Mississippi occurred in 1997. All of the levees, spillways, and control systems worked. There was very little inconvenience to anyone. The Bonne Carrie Spillway, north of New Orleans and on the east banks of the river, was operated. If the controls had not been in place in 1997, all of South Louisiana from Lafayette to Slidell, a distance of about 300 miles, would have flooded and effected the population of roughly 1,500,000 people.

In my opinion, we truly live in one of the most productive coastal areas of the world, and we are losing it. South Louisiana produces oil, gas, sulphur, salt and other minerals, commercial seafood, recreational fishing and hunting, and ecotourism second to none in the United States. The oil and gas produced in the area and the Gulf of Mexico off our coast for the last 70 years has kept the East Coast and the Midwest running. In Terrebonne Parish alone there are still approximately 2,000 oil and gas wells, and we only need about two to supply our energy needs. Therefore, the rest of this valuable commodity is being consumed by the rest of the nation. Frankly, we have sacrificed some of our coast to allow this to happen. Docks in Terrebonne Parish also land over $30 million of seafood a year, most of which is consumed by the rest of the nation. Therefore, the alarming loss of our area should be of great concern to the whole nation. It is truly America's wetland.

The Mississippi River and tributaries drain 41% of the United States through Louisiana, 70% of the grain exports from the United States goes through Louisiana, innumerable commerce and other industries exist because of the development of the Mississippi Valley -- the investment needed to save our area is more than justified. Of course, I failed to mention that over 2,000,000 United States citizens and tax payers also live in Coastal Louisiana.

We do have the resources to reduce and even reverse some of the negative effects in our area. We have the resources of the Mississippi River and its tributaries, the ingenuity of our minds, and the financial resources of the nation to properly manage the river and reverse some of the devastating, debilitating things that are happening to this area. Levee systems to replace the natural buffer from storms, freshwater diversion projects from the river in critical locations, barrier island and shore land protection, and

marsh management and restoration projects are just a few very broad things that must be done quickly. Time is not our ally in this problem. As we speak, the conditions get worse.

I am not very optimistic that our government can react to these problems before we are going to experience a major disaster. The right storm in the right direction and speed could drown 2,000 to 3,000 people in my community alone, and possibly as many as 10,000 to 20,000 people in the New Orleans Metropolitan Area. It is my understanding that the Office of Emergency Preparedness of Jefferson Parish rents a warehouse and stores 10,000 body bags for such a storm. The International Red Cross will not operate a hurricane evacuation shelter in Louisiana south of I-10 or I-12. The situation gets worse every year. I have never evacuated my home for a hurricane in the past, but I believe with the right storm in the right direction with enough time and warning I would leave and move north. I believe everyone who lives in South Louisiana should have a hurricane preparedness plan and an evacuation plan. I have these plans for myself, personally, and for my business. In South Louisiana, our terrorist threat is not Al-Queda, but the Gulf of Mexico. We do not need gas masks for Homeland Security, we need life vests and body bags.

As an engineer, it is rather frustrating to have the mouth of the Atchafalaya River, the only building delta in America, on our western boundary and the worst deteriorating coastline in the world three miles to the east. Also, to my east the Mississippi River dumps approximately 180,000,000 tons of silt per year in the Gulf of Mexico causing a dead zone as we are washing away 50 miles to the west. Our situation is a resource management problem. It is not like the Everglades which is a one-time fix. In Coastal Louisiana we are dealing with dynamic resources that will have to be managed as long as human beings live and prosper in the Mississippi Valley. Properly managed, the Mississippi is an unbelievable, dynamic, recurring resource.

Any projects built should have controls and be able to be modified as much as practical. They should constantly be monitored and adjusted if necessary. We are not dealing with an exact science. In many cases, we will make science. If we are going to survive, the knowledge and skills we develop will be exportable around the world. For me, this cause is not a labor of love, but a natural human instinct known as survival.

Once again Mr. Chairman, I would like to thank you for the opportunity to testify before the Committee regarding such an important issue. The people of South Louisiana and the nation will appreciate your dedication to solving this problem. I will be glad to answer any questions that you may have now and in the future.